

The Deathworlders

Books 

Chapter 1: Run, Little Monster

EPUB

Sep 11, 2014

11 min read

Terri Boone could feel the bass power cords begin to thump at her bones as she entered the bar and couldn't resist the feral grin that forced its way onto her face—it was exactly her kind of song.

For that matter, Afterburner was exactly her kind of bar. Affordable drinks, an Internet jukebox plugged straight into a set of speakers with the volume turned up full, three pool tables, a dartboard, and a couple of huge TV screens turned permanently to a sports channel. Right now, inaudible commentators were enthusing about the night's upcoming game between the Vancouver Canucks and the Arizona Coyotes. If she didn't live halfway across the country, she could have seen herself becoming a regular here.

She knew the man she was after by description and it didn't take long to see him working the bar, jawing with the regulars as he opened a couple of bottles and handed them over. Browned skin, full beard, a cross tattooed on his right forearm and a curious bald patch just forward of his left temple, that was her guy alright.

She slid up into a bar stool as the patrons vacated it and was treated to a warm grin.

“Not seen you in here before darling,” He said, floating his voice over the rampaging music with practised ease. “What can I get you?”

“I’ll have a Bud, please,” she called back, fishing out a bill from her purse.

“Hey, is your name Kevin Jenkins?”

“Ah.” He grinned as he retrieved the bottle from its fridge and uncapped it.

“Should have known. You’re here for my alien story.”

“You get that a lot?”

“Got to be at least fifteen nutjobs in here a month asking me about it and telling me about the thing they built in their garage so they can get in touch with the mothership,” Jenkins said, swapping her bills for change.

“So you claim to be an alien abductee but think others who claim that are nutjobs?” she sipped her beer.

“Oh yeah. You can always tell the bullshitters who’ve convinced themselves they got taken from the ones who really did,” Jenkins replied. “The real abductees don’t want to go back.”

The Brood had no music, nor did they need to shout. They were perfectly capable of vocalizing, but that clumsy mechanism was reserved only for speaking with other Broods. Within each Brood, the intimate cybernetic wiring

that allowed full thoughts to be sent in their entirety had made language entirely redundant.

One said: +*Trepidation; question*>+ “The watchful Prey have not seen us?””

Another said: +*Confidence; statement*>+ “They have not.” +*sneering*>+ “Nor have the beast prey.”

This provoked a wave of amusement that circled around the entire Brood. By their standards, the wry assumption that a non-sentient Prey species could hope to detect a cloaked Hunter vessel was the height of humour.

The youngest said: +*fear; query*>+ “The Prey are a deathworld species. We saw what just one of them did to the Brood of Five Poisons. Respectfully, Alpha, are we sure that all of our Brood shall return from this hunt?”

Alpha said: +*<Impatience; terse rebuke; instruction>*+ “If you fear them so, you may remain aboard the transport.”

It—their species did not reproduce in a gendered manner analogous to male and female—addressed the remainder as the youngling radiated sullen apology.

+*<inspiring reminder>*+ “We are the Hunters, they are the Prey. Death planet or not, we will have the technological advantage and surprise. An ambushed prey is meat in the maw. Our cousin-Broods will remember our triumph as we return with trophies from this formidable prey, they will know our courage and our skill.

And for the prey, they will know their place in the order of things.”

It turned to the one that operated their ship's electronic warfare suite.

+<*Query*>+ “Do you have an appropriately high-profile target?”

That one replied +<*statement*>+ “I do, Alpha. Their whole species will witness our hunt.”

The Brood vocalised as one for the first time, expressing their approval. The hunt was on.

“I’ll be honest, I don’t believe a word of it,” Terri told him.

“I don’t blame you,” Jenkins said. “But, look at this.” He leaned forward and turned his head so that she could inspect the bald patch on the left side of his head. Up close, it was

an intricate web of fine white scars that produced a pattern which looked disturbingly like circuitry.

“That’s where those grey fuckers shoved an experimental translation implant into me,” Jenkins said. “It worked, but the doctors who took it out of me said it was a pretty damn crude one.”

“These would be alien doctors,” Terri said. She had to admit, the scars were compelling evidence, but she was a natural skeptic. It went with the job.

“Yep. See they greys—‘Corti’ is the pronunciation used by species that have mouths which work kind of like ours—apparently they had this big eugenics program and turned themselves into a civilization of immoral scientists. They abduct pre-contact species, figure out how we tick, and use

that data to corner the market in translation implants and other biotech when we make first contact.

Real assholes. Most of the others are pretty cool though.”

He thought about this. “Actually, some of them are as dumb as a bag of beans.

There’s one species, look kinda like six-limbed giraffes with blue stripes.

Those guys are about as sharp as a sack of wet mice. But most of the critters out there are cool.”

Terri waggled her empty bottle by way of asking for a replacement. “So if they’re mostly pretty cool, why wouldn’t anybody want to go back out there?

Flying among the stars and all that sounds pretty fun.”

“It will be, when we’re out there,” Jenkins said, grabbing a replacement. “But for now, because we haven’t invented FTL travel, we’re legally considered to be non-sentient fauna rather than intelligent people. Even when there are trade ships out there captained by beings who’ve got all the brains of biscuits and gravy by our standards.”

“Why the interest, anyway?” He asked her, all of a sudden.

“I’m a private investigator,” She replied. “My client’s paying me a lot to travel the whole country looking for what he called ‘genuine’ abductees.”

“Do I fit the bill?” Jenkins asked.

She truthfully told him that she didn’t know—her client had only asked me to hunt down people who weren’t obvious crazies. He’d taken her to a UFO convention in New

Mexico, gestured to the whole room and said “Ms. Boone, this is the kind of people you’re *not* trying to find for me.”

It was a pretty nebulous description, but the client’s generous travel budget and seemingly limitless ability to keep up with her fees had kept Terri happy and comfortable on a road trip all over the USA for the best part of half a year, and if it meant she got to drink in exactly the right kind of bar interviewing a bartender who—she had to confess—was exactly the right kind of rugged sexy, then those were the kind of contracts she had dreamed of when she became a P.I.

“I guess he didn’t want me accidentally giving away what kind of answer I was looking for,” she finished. “If it helps though, I don’t think you’re crazy.

More...bitter about something.”

Jenkins laughed. “Yeah, Kirk said pretty much the same thing.”

“Kirk?”

“Oh yeah. The coolest guy out there. His species has a language that sounds like ball-bearings in a blender, but the first syllable of his name sounds a bit like “Kirk”, you know, like from Star Trek? So that’s what I called him. He told me a few weeks before I came back to Earth that I seemed bitter about something.”

“Was he right?” Terry asked.

“Could be. See, there’s this species called...”

“What the fuck?! Hey Jenks, are you seeing this shit?!”

With nary a ripple of displaced air, the Hunter raiding vessel slipped down into planetary atmosphere. Unnoticed by even the most sophisticated surveillance and interception network on the planet, it sashayed through cloud and current until it found its destination—a city of gleaming steel-and-glass towers on the banks of an inland sea, surrounded by snow-capped mountains. It settled above a dome-roofed building that nestled squat and low among the skyscrapers, causing some minor static in the transmissions coming from within, which were quickly compensated for by the small army of technicians who kept the broadcast going out all over the world.

+<*Query; intrigued*>+ “Combat trials, perhaps? Ritualized training to do battle in cold-weather conditions?”

+<*Terse; impatient*>+ “We are not anthropologists! Brace yourself, siblings. We drop in a full hand of pulses.”

+<*Eager; aggressive*>+ “Meat to the maw!”

The traditional hunting cry reverberated in silence among their collective minds, and then their boarding torpedoes erected their stasis fields, keeping any and all external forces from doing anything to their occupants. When they opened again a subjective non-event later, they had been fired through the roof of the Rogers Arena and each stood upright in a bullseye of cracked ice.

As one, the Brood stepped out of their assault torpedoes, spun up their heavy Kinetic Pulse guns, and opened fire indiscriminately into the stunned players, officials and spectators.

“Shit! Oh my god those poor people!”

The music had been shut off, and the sound of the sports channel turned up. The commentators were going delirious trying to describe the sight of an alien attack right in front of their eyes. Terri’s hand was across her mouth in a shocked reflex, watching them viciously lay into a mass of humanity that had, up until mere seconds earlier, been completely unaware of their existence.

“Hunters,” Jenkins said. He did so quietly, but everybody nearby suddenly glanced at him. Alone of everybody in the bar, he was the only one not apparently appalled by the sight. Instead, he had an expression of savage anticipation.

“Oh, y’all believe me now?” he asked. “Yep, those are the hunters I told you about. The ones I—me, your barkeep—personally beat the fuck to death with my own bare hands.”

His grin broadened. “And the stupid bastards made the mistake of raiding a hockey game? This, boys and girls, is going to be fucking funny.”

Alpha stepped from its assault pod and fired directly into the chest of the first Prey it saw—one of the armoured ones on the ice. Instantly, the Prey’s bewildered stillness gave way to the panic that all Prey fell victim to when the Hunters arrived. Many emitted high-pitched squeals of alarm, many more stamped to escape. Around it, the Brood stepped onto the ice and launched Kinetic bolts at anything that moved.

Each shot knocked Prey flying, and Alpha felt a savage surge of pride. Their Brood would gain much respect for taking on death planet predators and scattering them like

any other herd. Alpha could imagine the praise songs and taste the honour-feast already.

And then the Prey it had shot stood up.

“See, they have this planetary classification system for temperate worlds like ours.” Jenkins said amiably, as on the screen one of the players hauled himself back up onto his skates, clearly a bit winded but otherwise no worse than if he’d taken a hard body-check from one of the Arizonan players.

“Category one is, like, the Garden of Eden. You could drop any species in the galaxy down there completely buck bare and they’d be happy as Larry for the rest of their lives.” he continued, as Canucks and Coyotes players helped one another to their feet. Alien though their body language was,

everybody could see the alarm and surprise the Hunters were feeling as every single one of the humans they had shot turned out to be not only alive, but angry.

“Most planets are like, a four to six or so. You don’t want to get caught in the rain and you’ll need to work for your food, but generally it’s pretty easy living on those worlds.”

The aliens fired again, punching the players off their feet again.

“Anything above Class ten is considered a deathworld.” Jenkins continued as, yet again, the players got back up, and this time they started skating around the invading aliens, which formed a defensive corral and began to fire wildly at the circling sportsmen. It quickly became apparent that their reflexes and aim were remarkably sluggish and that the circling skaters were just too fast to hit.

Shot after shot splashed harmlessly on the plexiglass.

At first, the people behind the barrier cowered, but that plexiglass was rated to a much, *much* higher resilience than even the heaviest Kinetic Pulse fire.

It didn't take long for the cowering fans to realise this, and begin to chant: "Kick their ass! Kick their ass!"

Jenkins went on, raising his voice slightly above the swelling, bloodthirsty chant. "Deathworlds have things like high gravity, poisonous plants and critters, lots of carnivores, nasty little microorganisms, natural disasters like earthquakes or volcanoes, acid rain, high background radiation, stuff like that. Like I said, a deathworld is everything Class Ten or above, and anything that evolves there is supposed to be really goddamn dangerous."

By now on TV, the crowd were roaring at full volume: **“Kick their ass! Kick their ass!”**

Alpha broadcast: +<*Shock; dismay; terror; disbelief; shame*>+ Then one of the Prey hurtled towards it, at speeds that simply defied understanding.

The last thing it ever broadcast was: +<**PAIN!**>+

Most eyes in the bar closed and turned away from the carnage on the ice in disgust. Terri Boone watched out of morbid fascination. It seemed impossible that things which looked so menacing might break so easily.

Kevin Jenkins opened a beer for himself.

“Earth,” he said, with vicious satisfaction. “Is a Class Twelve.”